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Luke Family's Reign Is Extended at Westvaco
By Jonathan P. Hicks

The Luke family has run the Westvaco Corporation since the large paper and specialty chemicals company was founded in 1888. And yesterday the New York-based company continued that tradition by announcing that it had named John A. Luke Jr., executive vice president, to be the company's president and chief executive.

Mr. Luke, the great-great-grandson of the company's founder, will assume his duties Nov. 1. The 43-year-old Mr. Luke will replace his father, John A. Luke, who turned 65 last November. The board had asked the elder Mr. Luke to stay through this year; his brother, David L. Luke 3d, will remain as chairman.

Westvaco has benefited during the recession from its strategy of forgoing the commodity grades of paper in favor of higher-quality products that typically command higher prices. In recent years, for example, the company has concentrated more and more on bleached board, which is used in frozen food packaging and cigarette cartons, as opposed to linerboard, the paper that goes into shipping boxes. As a result, even though Westvaco's earnings fell about 27 percent last year, the downturn was roughly half the average decline for paper companies in 1991.

The younger Mr. Luke said he would continue to focus on the quality-products strategy, adding that he would continue to press for new product development as well as increasing sales overseas.

"We have worked hard and will continue to work hard to take our existing product lines and facilities and look for ways, through our research, to improve upon those products," Mr. Luke said in a telephone interview yesterday.

He added that he would also like to see growth in the company's specialty chemicals business, now about 10 percent of Westvaco's sales. "That growth would be through continued product development and investing in the facilities," he said.

John Luke Jr. joined Westvaco as an auditor in 1979. He graduated from Lawrence University in 1971 and holds an M.B.A. from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. By 1982, he was an assistant treasurer and became treasurer the following year. In 1989, he assumed responsibility for the international sales department of the company and its subsidiary in Brazil. He became executive vice president in 1990. From 1971 through 1974 he was an Air Force officer in Southeast Asia. He is married and has two children.

Photo: John A. Luke Jr., Westvaco Corporation (Bachrach)